



Centre for Research on Families and Relationships

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Why do non-academic stakeholders attend knowledge exchange events?

Introduction

Knowledge Exchange (KE) events are a key component to many knowledge exchange strategies which seek to create societal impact from academic research: they are now a recognised fixture within contemporary academic practice.

KE events are activities through which to disseminate academic research findings. They are social occasions where academics and non-academic stakeholders – including policymakers, practitioners, campaigners, and others – physically come together for a dedicated period of time to discuss academic research, its relevance to, and implications for, policy, practice, and wider society. They can take many different formats, including: conferences, debates, exhibitions, expert panel sessions, film screenings with Q&A sessions, lectures, meetings, seminars, and workshops.

Participating in Knowledge Exchange (KE) events represents a substantial commitment in resources from stakeholders. Even a ‘free’ event requires time and money to attend such social occasions. If ‘accessing research findings’ was the sole purpose, then the goal could have been achieved quicker and cheaper by other means, such as reading a briefing paper. This raises the question: why do non-academic stakeholders go to KE events?

Findings

- Participating in Knowledge Exchange (KE) events requires a commitment in resources. Understanding what non-academic stakeholders gain from them is useful for academics and KE professionals in designing their KE events, as well as for non-academic stakeholders evaluating their use of resources.
- Non-academic stakeholders experience KE events as providing more than opportunities to access academic research findings. The possibilities of dialogue, responding to and interrogating findings, enable deeper assessment of their relevance to professional concerns, as well as opportunities to influence academic research agendas.
- KE events are also valued for the time and space they create away from the distractions of the office environment to reflect on a single issue.
- Participants additionally value the opportunities to create new - or reinforce existing - relationships with academics and other stakeholders with whom they share professional interests.

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The study

This briefing derives from a PhD project based on a case study of the ESRC Centre for Population change (ESRC CPC). The ESRC CPC focuses on the dynamics and drivers of population change in a holistic manner by examining fertility, migration, ageing (and mortality); and its intersections across the life course. It draws on a number of disciplinary perspectives and methodological approaches, including advanced statistical modelling.

As part of its core investment the ESRC CPC funded a PhD studentship to examine their engagement with non-academic stakeholders. This briefing paper draws on that PhD thesis to explore the specific issue of what non-academic stakeholders gain from participating in KE events.

In an era of constrained resources, understanding why non-academic stakeholders commit to KE events is pertinent for academics and KE professionals who are involved in organising and hosting such events. This knowledge can help academics and KE professionals develop KE events in ways which maximise their value for their non-academic audiences, and by extension, maximise the non-academic impact of their events.

The evidence comes from one-to-one, face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 14 non-academic stakeholders who attended at least one CPC-branded KE event. This is a smaller subset of a larger data sample collected between 2012 and 2013. This sample includes those who worked for the UK or Scottish civil service, statutory agencies, local authorities and their umbrella organisations.

Learning about academic research findings

Ultimately, KE events are about conveying academic research findings to a wider audience. The non-academic stakeholders who attended CPC KE events did so to learn about academic social research projects in areas under their professional remit, and its implications for their work. This was generally framed as a technocratic, problem-orientated linear transfer of academic research knowledge.

This type of narrative was pervasive, and indeed represents ostensibly what KE events are all about – disseminating research findings. Yet if KE events were only about communicating research findings and its implications, then a briefing paper would also fulfil such a function. Therefore, while important, it does not fully address the question of why they go to the effort

of attending KE events. It was this follow-up question that led to many interviewees reflecting more carefully on the issue, opening up a more nuanced discussion around the other functions KE events fulfilled in their professional lives which make participation in them desirable.

Forums of discussion

Unlike briefing papers, online videos, or other non-interactive engagement media, KE events enable a reciprocal exchange where knowledgeable non-academic stakeholders can communicate with academics, and each other.

Communicating with academics

At KE events, non-academic stakeholders can communicate their knowledge, perspectives, and understandings of the implications of the research findings to academics. They are opportunities for mutual dialogue beyond the research being presented to engage with wider questions and challenges they are facing in their professional work, and discuss ways in which the research (or future research) could be of value to them.

“Sometimes you can establish with researchers what we’re interested in. So I suppose it’s an opportunity to tell them what kinds of things that we already know, and what we want to know” (Iain, NHS, England).

Some interviewees described KE events as opportunities for educating academics on the political dimensions of their research. Some interviewees described academics’ attempts to reach out to them as politically naïve, failing to understand how their research implications may be interpreted by the wider political environment (including elected representatives and the media). This was particularly problematic with issues which were ‘political hot topics’ such as immigration.

“Lots of researchers aren’t very good at knowing about the political or policy side of things [and these KE seminars] can be useful to tell them what the limits are for us. We’re obviously apolitical, but once things have gone to our elected members, we are a politically-driven organisation. So we have to support elected members, and we have to be mindful of that, and researchers aren’t very good at recognising the types of [political] constraints that we have.” (Susanne, policy officer, Scottish Local Authority)



KE events are thus opportunities to tell academics the things that they believe they should know, to share experiences, expertise, and inside knowledge with academics whom they may not otherwise have access to, and do so in a relatively informal environment.

Communicating with non-academic participants

While two-way communication is important, productive interactions are not mediated exclusively through exchanges between academics and non-academic stakeholders. There was a strong theme across many interviews that one of the most important functions of KE events was not to engage with academics in discussion, but each other.

“Well one of the key attractions [was] getting a discussion with your fellow people [to] share experiences and interpretations ... you’re also having the opportunity to speak to other people in the audience who’ve come along.” (Stephanie, government researcher, Scottish Government).

“There is something useful there about gauging what others [non-academic stakeholders] think about the research ... it’s interesting to hear their points of view ... I would say that this is probably the biggest benefit from it, really, was hearing other people’s perspectives on the research.” (Susanne, Policy Officer, Scottish Local Authority).

KE events can be interpretive forums which are mediated around a research project or programme, but in which the academic may or may not be situated at the core of discussion. Such forums can create opportunities for perspective-taking, drawing out new understandings of the research among all participants, including the academics. Such an understanding moves KE events away from a dialogical process between academics and non-academic stakeholder towards a multi-directional one, involving communication between multiple actors with diverse sources of knowledge and expertise. This moves the nature of the exchanges from an academic-dominated discussion to a more egalitarian one. Facilitating such a forum often requires the academic hosts to deliberately step back so that those type of conversations may happen. A number of participants pointed out that some of the most interesting conversations between themselves and other non-academic stakeholders did not happen during the ‘formal’ components of the meeting, but rather smaller chats at the periphery, usually around the coffee breaks and lunches.

Sites dedicated to reflecting

KE seminars can provide dedicated spaces and times for reflecting on the topic under their remit. All professionals are busy, and increasingly so. Many policymakers, practitioners, and support staff have responsibilities over several policy/practice areas, and often have the usual distractions of the office/clinical/work environment. KE events can demarcate a space away from those office-based distractions, and dedicate a period of time to thinking about a single issue. Creating times and spaces for reflecting is important for connecting new knowledge to what we already know.

“Most of the time you’re running from one thing to another [and] you don’t get an awful lot of time for thinking. There is an awful lot to be said about actually having a dedicated time to look at only one thing, and ... in my role, you’re jumping a lot from issue to issue.” (Elaine, Policy Support, Scottish Local Authority).

“It’s great to be away because a lot of the time you’re in the office and there are phone calls, and there are emails, people coming in and out... Just to have that time away from the office to think is really important.” (Morag, Policy Support, Scottish Local Authority).

Sites of networking

As with academic conferences, KE events provide invaluable opportunities for networking. The development and sustaining of interpersonal professional relationships may be the single greatest factor influencing the use and impact of academic social science research. Academics and non-academic stakeholders may have expansive networks, but they often do not get to meet those contacts in person (particularly if they are geographically distant). Moreover, KE events can create opportunities for academics and non-academic stakeholders to establish new contacts with individuals with whom they share a common interest in a specific topic but were previously unknown to them. KE events are therefore social occasions where participants can affirm their existing relationships, as well facilitating the establishment of new ones.

“We go [to seminars] because we’re trying to build up links with academics to make sure that we’re getting public value out of research that’s going on: we’re all interested in developing links and building links.” (Stephanie, government researcher, Scottish Government).

While networks between academics and non-academic stakeholders is important, it is the interactions and relationships between non-academic stakeholders themselves that many found particularly valuable. Almost all the interviewees (12/14) described KE seminars as opportunities to meet existing, or develop new, non-academic contacts within KE events.

“It’s not only the event itself that people are interested in, but it’s the networking that’s important ... It’s a good opportunity for people that are there to feel like they’re touching base with their colleagues.” (Ross, Policy Support, English intergovernmental organisation).

“We do need to sometimes get together to talk about things, and so I think a big part of going [to KE seminars] is the networking with the other local

authorities who’ll be there.” (Hamish, policy analyst, Scottish Local Authority).

Most interviewees explicitly stated that they felt KE events play a positive role in bringing people together from across different non-academic organisations yet who are united in their shared interest in the topic being discussed.

Interviewees from local authorities all described how they have counterparts who are working on the same challenges and policy areas, but are geographically distant from them. They described the need to at least occasionally meet up with those colleagues to discuss work matters, and that KE events offers excellent opportunities for them to do so. Sometimes they arranged meetings before or after the KE event itself to have either formal meetings, or informal chats in nearby cafés.

Conclusion

The overall argument made in this briefing paper is that KE events fulfil a number of functions that cannot be easily replicated by other forms of engagement. This makes the investment in resources required to attend them not only desirable, but often necessary.

In the digital age, physically travelling to meetings to share information between participants is no longer their primary function. Sharing information can happen through briefing papers, email, telephone, or conference calls. Instead, it is the social opportunities of KE events which makes them indispensable. These discussions and networking may happen during the event itself, the coffee breaks, buffet lunches, or at social drinks afterwards. The KE event becomes a proxy for a sociologically more interesting social event than simply the transfer of social research findings to non-academic audience. It is these other functions that make the event worth the investment in resources.

Recommendations

- KE events should be designed to provide participants ample opportunity for talk with the academics presenting research findings, while also enabling new perspectives to emerge from participants’ knowledge and expertise. This may require academics to take a conscious step back from leading discussions.
- KE events should enable non-academic participants from different organisations to engage with each other, while reflecting on a single issue of mutual concern
- Given that opportunities for dialogue and networking are a highly valued element of KE events, these should ideally be part of the formal agenda (such as breakout sessions), as well as occurring during the breaks/lunches. Extended lunches, coffee breaks and room to move around can facilitate networking and informal discussion.

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